


BLAKE



THE PITMAN GALLERY



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THE PITMAN GALLERY

BLAKE

(1757—1827)

*with an introduction
and notes by
Geoffrey Keynes*

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Introduction by Geoffrey Keynes

William Blake, artist, writer, mystic and philosopher, has suffered the fate of many another great man before him—obscure during his life, forgotten for many years after his death, finally to emerge a century later as one of the most significant figures of his time. His poem, known as 'Jerusalem', from the prophetic book *Milton*, is now sung so often that it has almost become a second national anthem, and he is accepted as the prophet of 'England's green and pleasant land'. Yet for nearly forty years after his death in 1827, Blake's name fell so deeply into oblivion that it became difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from legend, in the reconstruction of the story of his life. The situation was retrieved just in time by the publication in 1863 of Alexander Gilchrist's *Life*, written while some first-hand evidence was still to be had from witnesses who had known Blake in their younger days. Gilchrist's book is now a classic and has been recognised as worthy of a place among the immortals by its inclusion in the Everyman series of inexpensive reprints, so that it circulates in its thousands, while interest in every phase of Blake's poetry and painting is continually spreading. And yet to those who know Blake best this rising tide of popularity is an unexpected development of his influence, for he was never an 'easy' poet or painter. Nearly all his productions were highly spiced by thought and manner, and he had seemed to go out of his way to avoid any sort of popularity during his lifetime—though he complained bitterly enough when he was denied the recognition that he believed to be his due. His more cultivated contemporaries, such as Wordsworth, Lamb and Southey, all thought him mad, and indeed he deliberately tried to shock and mystify those who occasionally made advances of friendship and understanding. In his last years it was a small band of very young artists who broke down his reserve, and were allowed to treat him as the venerated seer and centre of their circle. These young men found Blake exciting, and their own art blossomed vigorously as long as they were under his spell, but it speedily drooped and languished when he was dead. They had in fact discovered in Blake's art and personality his power to stimulate, a quality which, although unperceived for so long after his death, has now been rediscovered in our own time. It is no doubt true that every manifestation of greatness in painting and drawing may be called exciting, but usually it is a cool and impersonal excitement, at least for the ordinary man who is not himself an artist. In Blake's pictures it is compounded of a number of different qualities blended in varying degrees—varying with his mood at the moment, the circumstances in which he worked, the interest he happened to feel in the

subject, or the period of his life in which the works in question were produced. The last of these factors is particularly important, for Blake continually developed his faculties, and as an old man was capable of doing work as good as, and sometimes better than, any that he could do thirty years earlier.

This capacity for continued development and improvement is one of the most startling features of Blake's work. Most artists become set in grooves as their years advance and the fecundity of their invention tends to wane. Not that it can be claimed that Blake was innocent of grooves. In a sense every mannerism, which no artist is without, is a groove, and Blake was full of mannerisms which can be detected in nearly everything he did, from the age of sixteen as an engraver's apprentice until the day of his death at the age of seventy. Anyone who dislikes Blake's mannerisms can never really enjoy his art, since cause and offence will confront him every time he looks at any picture by Blake. Conversely, those who enjoy his mannerisms, or 'absurdities' as they may be affectionately termed, will find in them lasting cause for joy. Recognition of the signature tunes, so to speak, will never cease to please; partly, perhaps, because they are evidence of a certain attractive innocence in Blake's art, and even more because they prove his absolute integrity. He was never afraid to be himself and never played down to popularity or the desire for gain.

From another point of view Blake's mannerisms may be forgiven him because they were but the vehicle or medium through which he was able to express the originality of his mind and his inexhaustible power of invention. They are the symbols by the use of which his meaning is conveyed; and the more closely his art is studied the more astonishing becomes the realisation of the variety and subtlety of his symbolism. This observation compels recognition of the fact that Blake's art is intensely intellectual, and although this is frequently unnoticed by the casual observer, who may, indeed, be much more aware of the deceptive innocence already mentioned, it is in reality the hidden spring of his power to excite, for most people who find it worth their while to look at his pictures at all will respond, even though quite unconsciously, to the intellectual content of a picture. They may suppose they are tasting the delights of drawing, composition, and colour, all extremely important ingredients in the pleasure they are experiencing; but if to these is added an intellectual idea, then the pleasure becomes both more intense and more lasting. Coupled with this quality in Blake's art is the fact that he may be called a 'literary' artist. Nearly always he was illustrating his own writings or those of another, or even both at once, and



Plate 1. *God Creating Adam.* (See page 24)

even when he was painting a separate picture, as distinguished from the numerous sets or series of illustrations which he made, it would be a pictorial representation of a literary idea, rather than a study of an individual human being or of nature. He did, in fact, regard 'copying nature' as a waste of time, and so seldom produced a landscape or a portrait. If he tried, the result was not a success. When he executed a series of heads of the poets for a frieze to decorate his friend William Hayley's study, he created a lovely range of imaginative and intellectually convincing representations of the poets. Their heads had become the symbols of their writings as interpreted by Blake's mind and recorded on canvas—the essence of the poets rather than their likenesses. If, on

the other hand, he attempted a miniature portrait of his best friend and patron, Thomas Butts, with those of his wife and son, the results were stilted and lifeless. They had no literary or intellectual significance for Blake, and so lacked interest both for him and for the onlooker. Similarly a landscape, merely as a landscape, did not interest or inspire him, though he could use a landscape background with great effect, every detail becoming a symbol exerting its influence on the composition as a whole.

Seldom, indeed, if ever, has there been another great artist who has subordinated reality to imagination so completely and consistently as Blake did. In his boyhood he conceived two admirations, one for the gothic style,

and another for the anatomical extravagances of Michelangelo, and these influences kept their hold on him until the end of his life. Their effect was so strong that they became part of the medium through which his imagination worked, and to some extent they limited the growth of his individuality, so that critics of his work have been able to point to them as a real weakness in his style. Yet they probably served, too, a useful purpose in curbing the waywardness of his mind, which without them would have departed still further than it did from the world of ordinary men. Even so Blake's cultivation of the imaginative faculty won him a high degree of freedom from the binding influences of his time, the conventional sentimentalities and prettiness, which had so profound an effect upon some contemporary artists; but it also earned him the distrust and even the abuse of his critics. They failed to distinguish originality from insanity, and so during many years of his life consigned him to a degree of isolation and obscurity which it is now hard for us to credit, with so much of his immense output displayed before us.

In making a choice of Blake's pictures for reproduction in the year 1944 there were the unavoidable limitations imposed by circumstances, and the pictures have therefore been taken only from among those in the collection belonging to the Tate Gallery. The Blake collection which used to be seen in the Octagon Room at the Tate Gallery represented the artist adequately, if not nearly as fully as might be wished. Since its removal to a safer place the collection has, however, been greatly enriched by the splendid gift made by Mr. W. Graham Robertson in September, 1939, of eight of the great series of colour-prints executed by Blake, in 1795. Advantage has been taken of this accession by including four of the colour-prints among the subjects represented here, and they are the earliest in date among the pictures chosen. One direction in which Blake continually tried to exercise his originality was in the realm of technique. He frequently expressed contempt for the work of many other artists, and criticised particularly the methods used by one of his greatest contemporaries, Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was President of the Royal Academy during the earlier part of Blake's active life. We now know that in some respects Blake's criticisms were just, so many of Reynolds's pictures having become darkened and obscured by his deliberate attempt to give them an 'old master' appearance during his lifetime. Blake reacted, indeed, so violently that he rejected oil paints as a medium almost completely, and appeared as the protagonist of painting in water-colours or in tempera on a gesso ground, producing what he called 'frescoes'. He believed that these were destined to bring him greater fame after his death than anything done by his rivals among the Academicians. Unfortunately his new media, the exact composition of which has

remained his secret, have not, in many instances, withstood the ravages of time as successfully as the conventional productions of other painters, and some of his pictures have perished completely. Others have survived in a much altered and darkened form, though even so they have often retained a beauty of form and colour which nothing short of actual destruction could entirely spoil. Among his secret processes the colour-prints of 1795 hold a very important place, some of them being still almost as bright and splendid as when they left his hands. The method of their production has been carefully investigated, and to a large extent elucidated, by Mr. Graham Robertson himself. It cannot be described in detail here, but in essence it consisted in painting the design in distemper on a millboard and taking a print from it on paper while the paint was still wet. The print was then worked up with more painting by hand. Further impressions could be taken by reviving the design on the millboard, so that in some instances several prints of the same subject, though all different in detail, are still known to exist. This peculiar technique is the source of the unusual blotted effects seen in the foregrounds and backgrounds of the 'colour-prints'. The outlines of the main figures of the designs were usually made definite and clear by the subsequent detailed working to which they were subjected.

Of the designs in the present series, *God Creating Adam* is difficult to discuss or describe without an excessive use of superlatives. It represents Blake's inventive genius working at its highest level. In this picture he has attempted the impossible—and succeeded. He so conveys the stupendous effort of the act of creation that it is to be regarded as one of the supreme illustrations of Genesis hitherto made by an artist—in a very different vein, it is true, from that used by Blake's idol, Michelangelo, in the Sistine Chapel, but none the less standing in the highest rank among the achievements of the Spirit of Man. It embodies several of Blake's mannerisms. The ancient bearded man, here representing Jehovah, appears as God or man or symbolic figure in a large number of his pictures. The long robe is one of his most constant 'properties', and the trick of incorporating the feathers of God's wings in the muscles of his limbs is seen many times elsewhere. It is repeated, indeed, in one of the present series representing Nebuchadnezzar. The serpent twined round Adam's legs is one of Blake's favourite symbols, and may be taken to mean some aspect of materialism, always evil in Blake's sight, since it conflicts with and stultifies the life of art and imagination. Here Adam is seen to be in the toils of the serpent from the first moment of his existence.

In the colour-print *Nebuchadnezzar* Blake is again at his favourite task of illustrating the Bible. In this instance he embodies a fantastic theme in a fantastic design, based accurately on details given in the text. The

result is one of his 'terrific' designs, an aspect of Blake's mind which has long earned him some notoriety, because it produced the well-known portrait-vision of *The Ghost of a Flea*. This kind of fantasy might well be claimed in modern jargon as evidence of 'surrealism' in Blake's art, and, indeed, Blake was so much inclined to give his imagination the freest possible rein that he may justifiably be called one of the greatest surrealists in the history of art. But where the imaginative depths are called up by the power of a mind such as Blake's the faculty ceases to be the cult of a coterie and takes its proper place as an ingredient in the whole body of the artist's work.

The colour-print *Pity* is an example of Blake's faculty for illustrating the mental image called up in a poet's words by means of a picture which, although it uses the literal details to convey the image to the eye in shape and colour, yet keeps the ethereal quality of the poetry. Had Shakespeare seen this pictorial version of his lines, he must have acknowledged the adequacy of their translation from word to sight. Blake uses a pattern which, despite its symmetry, has in it so much movement and atmosphere that it keeps the idea at the level of poetry, where a less imaginative artist might have brought it heavily to earth. Blake's use of symmetry is seen very frequently in his designs, and sometimes it becomes too obvious a device, though in the present instance it is used with complete success. Blake was a close student of Shakespeare and made many designs in illustration of his ideas, but never more happily than in this picture.

The colour-print *The House of Death* is an example of Blake's many designs illustrating the poetry of Milton, with whom Blake had so much in common that he clearly believed there was some mystical union of their spirits. In *The House of Death* he takes a passage from 'Paradise Lost', and portrays in paint, very literally again, the ghastly details of Milton's lines. He has, indeed, conveyed even more grimly than do Milton's words the idea of an evil God brooding over human disease and suffering. The beard of the Jehovah who created Adam has grown and spread until it has become in *The House of Death* a hairy monster waving its tentacles over the prostrate bodies of mankind, again a surrealist vision called up from the subconscious depths of the imagination.

The second of the present series in chronological order is the water-colour drawing *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*. This was done some ten years later than the colour-prints, or was at any rate first painted about the year 1805. The design must have met with more contemporary approval than most of Blake's works, for he painted it no less than five times with slight variations in detail and colouring. One of these was bought by Sir Thomas Lawrence, who is stated to have admired it so much that he kept it constantly on his studio table. Modern taste agrees with Lawrence's, and it is generally regarded as one of the

loveliest pictures that Blake ever painted. Its pale and delicate colouring is of exquisite quality, and the two groups of maidens are well characterized. The popularity of the design may perhaps be attributed partly to the fact that it presents few of Blake's more stilted mannerisms, its lines being admirably free. The angel with the trumpet in the sky, heralding the approach of the bridegroom, is conceived in a characteristic vein, and is an effective poetical gloss on the Bible story without in any way disturbing the balance of the composition.

Our series now passes over a period of about twenty years, the next picture being the tempera painting *Satan Smiting Job with Boils*. During these twenty years Blake had passed through the most trying period of his life, and his experiences had left deep wounds on his mind. In 1805 with the publication of his well-known illustrations of Blair's poem 'The Grave', he had seemed to be on the road to success, but in 1809 his hopes were dashed by the complete failure of his private exhibition of pictures at his brother's house in Golden Square. For the most part his pictures were ignored; such notice as they were given was hostile to the point of accusations of insanity. For the next eight years he relapsed into such obscurity that few evidences of how he even succeeded in staying alive have remained, and it seems certain that he endured great poverty and suffering. At length, in 1817, he formed a friendship with a young and rising painter, John Linnell, under whose generous care he recovered his hold on life, made new friends, and carried out some of the outstanding achievements of his career as a creative artist. The history of the patriarch Job had interested him from an early period of life as shown by drawings made at various times from 1788 onwards. Among the first of his new activities in 1817 was a magnificent series of large water-colour drawings illustrating the history of Job according to his own conception of the story, and these he afterwards engraved, exhibiting in his plates a mastery of technique and a wealth of creative imagination which he had never before equalled. There can be little doubt that he saw in the story of Job a reflection of the spiritual events of his own life, and that Job's misfortunes in some way typified his own. The subject *Satan Smiting Job with Boils*, being the climax of Job's suffering in the pit of misery from which he was presently to be delivered, had therefore a special meaning for Blake, and it may have been for this reason that he chose it out of the whole series of twenty-one designs for elaboration in the form of a splendid painting which ranks very high among his greater works. It is a painting in tempera on a mahogany panel, and his technique in this kind of work had so much advanced that the picture has not suffered in any way by the passage of time. The colouring is brilliant and the surface undamaged, so that it can be judged without allowances made for any changes that might have occurred since it left the artist's hands. In

Plate 2

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

'Then shall the Kingdom of Heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them; but the wise took oil in their vessels, with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil, for our lamps are all gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so, lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.'—St. Matthew, XXV. v. 1–9.

London: Tate Gallery

The ten virgins have just left a wooden hut on the right, where they have been sleeping. To the left the wise ones in white and bluish dresses step calmly in a row to meet the bridegroom. The virgin at the end of the row points an admonishing forefinger to direct the foolish ones who, dressed in various colours, form a disordered group on the right in attitudes of supplication or dismay. The five wise ones each have a lighted lamp hanging from one hand. Only two lamps are seen in the other group, and these swing emptily from their wrists. Behind the virgins is a dark hilly landscape with dawn showing in the cloudy sky. The black shapes of buildings are seen on the right. At the top an angel, whose body merges with the clouds, heralds with a trumpet the coming of the bridegroom.

From the collection of Lord Coleridge. It was sold at Christie's on December 12th, 1898, and was acquired by the late Miss A. G. E. Carthew, by whom it was bequeathed to the Tate Gallery at her death in 1940. Four other water-colours of the same subject are known, one of which belonged to Sir Thomas Lawrence. A pencil sketch for a similar subject is now in the United States.

Water-colour. Not signed or dated, but probably executed in 1805. Size 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 13in.



Plate 3
NEBUCHADNEZZAR

'The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar, and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws.'—Daniel, IV, 33.

London: Tate Gallery

Blake's picture presents an almost literal image of the words in the Bible. Nebuchadnezzar, with the glaring eyes of insanity, is crawling on hands and knees. His huge forearms look like legs, and his fingers and toes have grown long claws. Feathers on his body and thighs have been welded with his flesh, and his long reddish beard drags on the ground. Behind him is a sort of thatched byre, with trees overhanging it on either side.

Bought from Blake by Thomas Butts, and included in the debtor and creditor account under the date September 7th, 1805, the sum of one guinea being charged for the print. It was bought from Butts's grandson, Captain Butts, in 1906 by Mr. W. Graham Robertson, who presented it to the Tate Gallery on September 7th, 1939. Three other examples of the print are known. There are pencil sketches for the design in Blake's Notebook (The Rossetti MS.) pp. 44 and 48, and a sepia drawing of the subject is believed to exist. Nebuchadnezzar is also represented on plate 24 of 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 1790.

Colour-printed monotype. Signed at the lower right-hand corner 1795 W.B. inv. Size $16\frac{3}{4} \times 23\frac{3}{4}$ in.



Plate 4

PITY LIKE A NAKED NEW-BORN BABE

*'And Pitty, like a naked new-borne-Babe,
Striding the blast, or Heaven's Cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightlesse Couriers of the Ayre,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That teares shall drowne the winde.'*

Macbeth, Act I. Scene 7. Lines 21–25.

London: Tate Gallery

The mother lies on her back on the green earth, enveloped from the breasts downwards in a whitish garment with her hands clasped upon her bosom. Her head is thrown back with her tresses spread upon the ground, and she gazes anxiously upwards. Her infant springs up with outstretched arms to be caught in the hands of a woman bestriding a grey horse. The rider's hair streams in the air, and the steed's outstretched legs and closed eyes express the blind speed of its course upon the wind. Beyond it is a second horse whose rider is turned away, so that her face is not seen. Her streaming robe and outstretched arms add to the effect of speed. Below the 'sightlesse couriers' are heavy clouds with rain streaming from them.

Sold by Blake to Thomas Butts, and bought from his grandson, Captain Butts, in 1906 by Mr. W. Graham Robertson, who presented it to the Tate Gallery on September 9th, 1939. There are two, or perhaps three, other examples of the print. One of these, now in the British Museum Print Room, is on a smaller scale. The Museum also possesses two pencil studies for the design.

Colour-printed monotype. Signed at the lower right-hand corner Blake. No date, but executed about 1795. Size $16\frac{3}{4} \times 21\frac{3}{8}$ in.



Plate 5
THE HOUSE OF DEATH

*'Immediately a place
Before his eyes appeared, sad, noysom, dark,
A Lazar-house it seem'd, wherein were laid
Numbers of all diseas'd, all maladies
Of ghastly Spasm; or raking torture, qualmes
Of heart-sick Agonie, all feavorous kinds.*

*Dire was the tossing, deep the groans, despair
Tended the sick busiest from Couch to Couch
And over them triumphant Death his Dart
Shook, but delaid to strike, though oft invoc't
With vows, as their chief good, and final hope.'*

Paradise Lost. Bk. XI. 1. 477-493.

London: Tate Gallery

In the foreground, stretched upon matting, are three naked people, two men and a woman, with contorted bodies and agonised faces. On the right the bald greenish figure of Despair gazes stonily down at the sufferers, his head bowed and a dagger in his hand. In the background are two others, the one on the right bowing his face to the ground with his head held between his hands, that on the left raising himself up to gaze at the central figure of the design. This, dominating the whole scene, is an ancient brooding man with a vast beard streaming almost to the ground. His eyes are closed and his arms are stretched out horizontally on either side, the hands resting on the ends of a huge scroll in the form of a bow. Arrows of disease dart from either side of him, and he is surrounded by a dense cloud out of which he seems to rise.

Bought from Blake by Thomas Butts, and included in the debtor and creditor account under the date July 5th, 1805, the sum of one guinea being charged for the print. It was bought from Butts's grandson, Captain Butts, in 1906, by Mr. W. Graham Robertson, who presented it to the Tate Gallery on September 9th, 1939. Three other examples of the print are known.

*Colour-printed monotype. Signed at the lower left-hand corner W.B. inv. 1795.
Size $18\frac{5}{8} \times 23\frac{1}{4}$ in.*



Plate 6
SATAN SMITING JOB WITH BOILS

London: Tate Gallery

The composition is nearly the same as was used in the 'Illustrations of the Book of Job', 1825 (No. 6 of the engravings). Job is lying on a heap of straw, naked except for a piece of matting across his middle. His head is thrown back and his hands are lifted in agony. His wife kneels at his feet with bowed head and streaming hair. Satan with his feet resting on Job's body forms the central and dominating figure of the picture. He has scaly thighs, and huge red bat's wings spread out against dark clouds of smoke hanging heavily in the sky. His arms are outstretched, and arrows of disease are shooting towards Job from his right hand, while with his left he is emptying a phial of poison on to him. Behind Job's head on the right his home is consuming in flames and the clouds of smoke arising from it seem almost to support Satan's wings from behind. Beyond Satan are blue-green hills with Druid buildings lying in their folds. On the left is a stretch of sea with the orange globe of the sun sinking behind it. The sun is fringed with belts of red and blue light, which shoot up in a series of points like those on Satan's wings. The colouring of the whole picture has a lurid brilliance; the edges of Satan's wings and the arrows in his right hand are touched with gold.

The symbolic figure of Satan, that is, the embodiment of spiritual evil, is given a greater dominance in the painting by the addition of great crimson wings which do not appear in the earlier versions, and the magnificence of the colouring is enhanced by the sinking sun with its crenellated bands of colour.

First owned by George Richmond, who presumably acquired it from Blake himself. Later in the collections of Frederick Locker, and of Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke. After Dilke's death it was sold at Christie's on April 4th, 1911, and was bought by the Carfax Gallery. It was then acquired by Miss Dodge, who presented it to the Tate Gallery in 1918.

Tempera on mahogany panel. Signed at the lower right-hand corner W. Blake fecit. No date, but probably done about 1825. Size 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.



Plate 7
DANTE AND VIRGIL
AT THE ENTRANCE TO HELL

Illustration to Dante's Divine Comedy

*'All hope abandon, ye who enter here !
Such characters, in colours dim, I mark'd
Over a portal's lofty arch inscrib'd.'*

Cary's 'Dante', Hell. Canto III. Lines 9-11.

London: Tate Gallery

Dante and Virgil, clad respectively in robes of red and blue, are stepping on to the lintel of Hell-Gate, opening in the rock with a leafy tree on either side. Through the opening are seen the intersecting outlines of the circles of Hell, with water in the foreground. Tongues of red and blue flame rise up on all sides, and a few small tortured figures are seen in the distance. On a stone over the entrance Blake has written in pencil a line from Dante with his own version in English below: 'Leave every Hope you who in Enter.'

Water-colour. Signed W.B. Size about $12\frac{3}{4} \times 9$ in.

Blake made one hundred and two drawings illustrating Dante's Divine Comedy for John Linnell in 1825-7. They were sold with the Linnell Collection at Christie's on March 15th, 1918, and bought for a combination of Public Galleries. This and the following three plates are reproduced from this series.



Plate 8
THE SIMONIAN POPE

Illustration to Dante's Divine Comedy. Hell. Canto XIX.

London: Tate Gallery

Virgil, carrying Dante clasped in his arms, is seen striding down a rocky path in the upper part of the design. Below them is a circular opening of transparent stone in which is confined the Simonian Pope, Nicholas the Third, suspended head downwards, with his legs projecting at the top. Flames spring from the opening and from the Pope's feet. Red and blue clouds roll around below.

Water-colour. Size about $12\frac{3}{4} \times 9$ in.



Plate 9
DANTE AND VIRGIL
AT THE ENTRANCE TO PURGATORY

Illustration to Dante's Divine Comedy. Purgatory. Canto IX

London: Tate Gallery

Dante and Virgil stand together in attitudes of supplication on a circular path at the edge of a cliff. On the right is a huge pointed archway opening into the rock, approached by three steps, white, black and red. In the entrance is seated God's angel, a white bearded figure with wings. Behind and to the left of Dante and Virgil is the sea reflecting the light of the rising sun, which is partly obscured by a red convoluted cloud.

Water-colour. Size about $12\frac{3}{4} \times 9$ in.

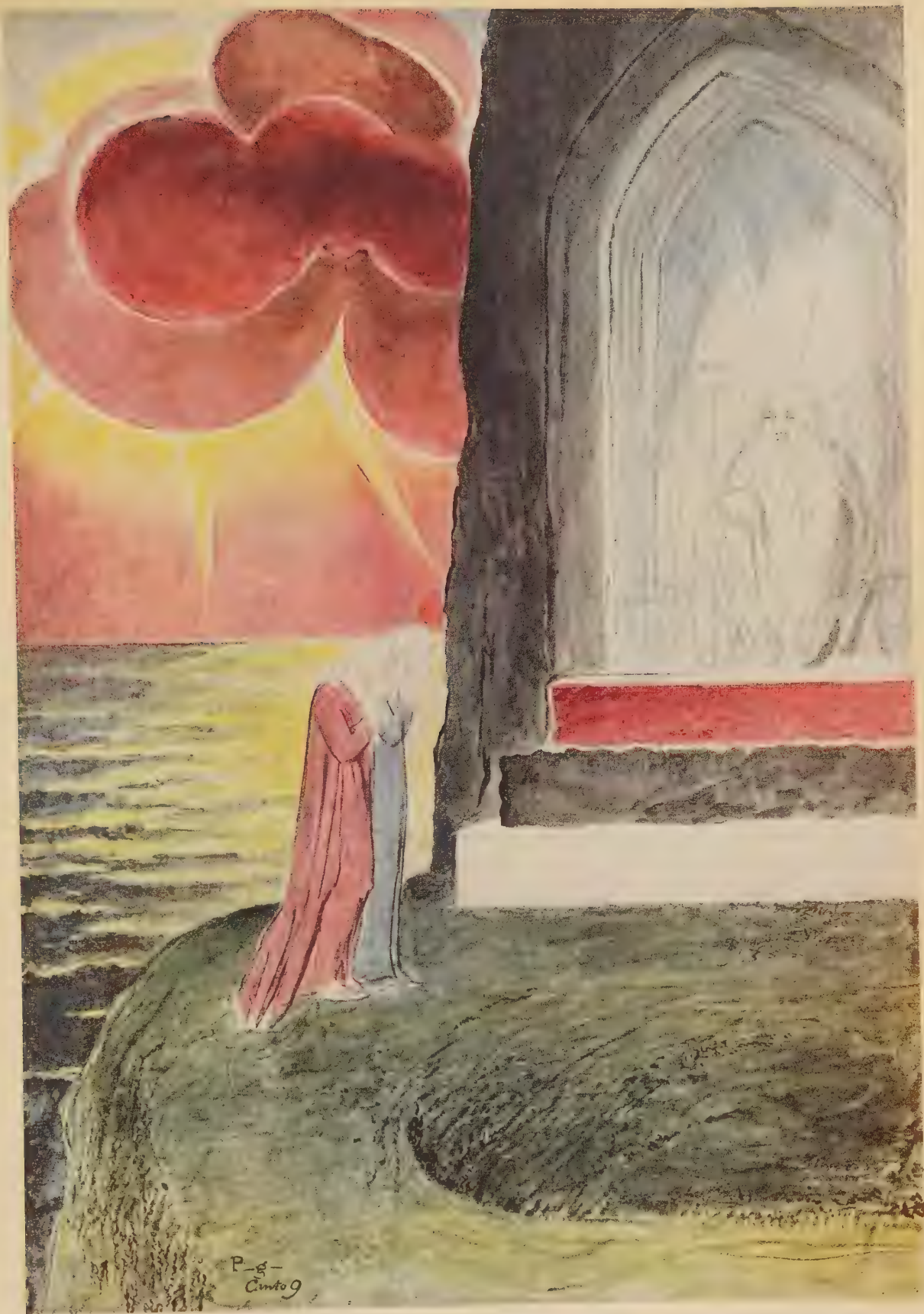


Plate 10
BEATRICE ADDRESSING DANTE
FROM THE CAR

Illustration to Dante's Divine Comedy. Purgatory. Canto XXIX–XXXI
London: Tate Gallery

Dante, standing on the extreme right, looks up at Beatrice, who addresses him from the platform of the triumphal car. The platform has a suggestion of decoration to show that it is an altar symbolizing the Christian Church. Beatrice wears a crown, and a long green veil descends from her head. The car is drawn by a Gryphon, half eagle and half lion, and around Beatrice arise many wings set with peacock eyes and bearing the heads of the four living creatures, symbols of the Evangelists. Beside the car are three virgins representing the evangelical virtues. Hope in a green robe on the extreme left raises her arms to heaven. Next to her, Charity, in red, with bright yellow tresses, has the figures of infants ranged along her sides. In front of the right wheel of the car is Faith, dressed in white. She is interceding for Dante, and extends her right arm towards him while her left points to an open book. The wheel itself is not described in Dante's poem, but it is an important feature of Blake's design. It is formed by a coloured vortex, reflecting in its turn the peacock eyes and the heads of the three virgins.

Blake has marked the drawing at the bottom 'Canto 29 & 30'. But although the description of the car comes in Canto 29, Dante first saw it from the other side of a stream, and he did not approach close to the Gryphon drawing the car until he had crossed the stream as described in Canto 31.

Water-colour. Size about 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 9 in.



P. g. Canto 29 n. 30

continued from page 5]

the water-colour drawing and in the engraving the theme carries its proper weight in the series, but it is only in this painting that it reaches its full value.

The last four pictures of the present series are examples of his illustrations to Dante, the great work on which he was engaged during the last two years of his life. He succeeded in making one hundred and two water-colour paintings, and engraved seven of them on large copper plates before he died in August, 1827, but some of the designs are unfinished, and he would doubtless have made many more had he lived. It is related that, though nearing the age of seventy, he undertook to learn Italian in order that he might read Dante in the original tongue, although he could have used H. F. Cary's translation had he chosen. That the story is not pure legend is shown by the inscription written over Hell-Gate in one of the pictures reproduced here. Blake has written Dante's line in Italian with his own literal rendering below instead of the more familiar line from Cary. The whole Dante series provides the completest testimony to the power of Blake's mind that we possess. He found his own mysticism and his moral sense to be reflected in Dante's poem, and he illustrated the ideas and incidents described in it with a freedom and a gusto which he had never achieved before

on such a scale. A selection of four from that part of the series now belonging to the Tate Gallery, gives but a taste of the whole feast of colour and design provided by Blake's hand and mind. That he laboured with a continuous sense of intellectual excitement and urgency is sufficiently plain, and in doing it he shed much of his own crust of arbitrary symbolism, so that it is easier than usual for the uninitiated observer to appreciate his work.

It has sometimes been held by critics of Blake that he was 'no colourist', presumably meaning that his choice of colours was often crude or ineffective in expressing the feeling for beauty which he certainly possessed. Yet the present small series of pictures should go far to dispel this impression, even though the colours have unavoidably lost something of their value in the process of reproduction. Blake's use of colour was often daring, and sometimes may have overstepped the bounds of perfect taste. But the lovely delicacy of the colouring of *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, the rich note of tragedy struck by the splendours of *Satan Smiting Job*, and the varied beauties of the Dante water-colours provide more than a suggestion that Blake had an acute and instructed colour sense, and that he knew how best to use it in the service of that art which was to him his life and his religion.

Note on Plate 1

GOD CREATING ADAM

Colour-printed monotype. Signed on the foreground 1795 W.B. Size 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 21 in.

London: Tate Gallery

Adam lies extended on a greenish rock with legs and arms outstretched in a cruciform figure, though the right arm is not seen. His face is agonised, and round his legs is twined a serpent, whose head is hidden. Over Adam floats the stupendous figure of God in the form of an old man with long locks of hair standing out from his head, and a beard plastered in solid masses to his body. He wears a long robe so that only his hands and right foot are uncovered. His left hand rests on the rock on which Adam is lying, his right covers the right side of Adam's forehead. He is supported above Adam by huge feathered wings, so massive that they seem to be made of bronze, and the sinews of his shoulders are continued into the feathers, giving an impression

of unlimited power. His face expresses the concentrated effort of creation. Behind God is half the sun's fiery orb with purple and blue rays streaming from it into heavy clouds which overhang the whole scene. A fringe of water laps the rock below.

Sold by Blake to Thomas Butts, and included in the debtor and creditor account under the date of 7th September, 1805. The sum of one guinea was charged for the print. It was bought from Butts's grandson, Captain Butts, by Mr. W. Graham Robertson in 1906. Presented by Mr. Robertson to the Tate Gallery on 9th September, 1939. No other example of the print is known. There is a pencil sketch for the design in Blake's Notebook (Rossetti MS.) p. 54.

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BOTTICELLI

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